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Counterpoint as Technique in 
The Great Gatsby

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DESPITE the critical arguments to the contrary, the major technical device in The Great Gatsby is not so much the choice of a narrator or the use of symbolism or even scenic dramatization, but the technique of counterpoint in characterization, setting (including symbol and scene), and narrative structure. Fitzgerald places character against character, setting against setting, and one plot against another to demonstrate for the reader the moral change and ethical growth of his narrator, Nick Carraway. Nick’s development follows what is usually a three-fold pattern of contrasts. Almost invariably, his valuation of characters, places, and scenes is based, first, upon their social classifications, then upon their individual worths, and, finally, upon their significance in moral and ethical terms. The Great Gatsby is an initiation story and its most important character is actually its narrator, for the novel’s meaning is finally indistinguishable from Nick’s change in awareness. And the change in character is due, ultimately, to Nick’s recognition that inflexible social conventions and moral standards are less valid than systems which judge the individual on an individual basis. Consequently, the “normal” standards are reversed in the novel, and its noblest character turns out to be an idealistic bootlegger who becomes an agent for moral regeneration and provides the tragic counterplot to the social comedy of spiritual and communal integration. Finally, it is through Nick’s enlightenment that Fitzgerald makes an ambiguous, though by no means confusing or inadequate, comment upon the pursuit of the “American Dream.”

The most immediately visible use of counterpoint in characterization is the relationship between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby. Alike in many ways, Buchanan and Gatsby are almost diametrically opposite in the deeper aspects of their personalities. In one of the finest essays on the novel, Marius Bewley points out several of the contrasts. He says, for example, that, while “youth is an essential quality of them both,” Tom Buchanan is a man whose youth is anti-

climactic—as Fitzgerald writes, “one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at 21 that everything afterward savors of anticlimax.” Such past achievement is true of Tom’s football career at Yale, as well as his social and economic stature, which was passed down to him, rather than earned, and with which he lives arrogantly and brutally and selfishly. And there is nothing in Tom’s present life that would suggest either intellectual or humanitarian accomplishment. Gatsby, on the other hand, is a man who deals in futurity, despite his belief he can re-capture the past (perhaps even because he believes it). Bewley says, for instance, that “Gatsby’s youth leaves an impression of interminability” (p. 138). Where Tom’s life is all denouement, Gatsby’s is all “rising action.” His real life, his dream, always lies in the future, its goals always just ahead, just out of reach, but forever beckoning: Where Tom’s energy is basically physical, Jay’s is essentially spiritual, the one being propelled by bodily strength, the other by visionary magnificence. And where Tom is essentially cruel—he has a “cruel body”—Gatsby is profoundly kind, always seeing the best in people, or, what is better, seeing them as they see themselves.

But what all these contrasts suggest most strongly is the different valuation Nick Carraway places upon the two: initially cozened by the social contrasts between Jay and Tom, Nick realizes ultimately that, whatever his flaws, Gatsby is an infinitely nobler human being than his upperclass counterpart. And the difference in Nick’s valuation, crucial to his own moral growth, is based upon the recognition of that idealism which makes Gatsby both stronger and weaker than Buchanan: stronger because morally less corruptible, and weaker because physically more vulner-

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are aptly conveyed by her flower name. These contrasts are borne out, moreover, by the language Nick uses to characterize the two women: Myrtle is seen almost invariably in biological terms. For example, Nick comments that "there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering" (p. 25), while at another time he writes: "The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur" (pp. 30-31). Moreover, Nick's descriptions emphasize the earthy, the physical: "... in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, ... she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can" (p. 25). And it is only because of Myrtle's physical, sexual vitality that she appeals to Tom Buchanan. On the other hand, Daisy Buchanan, alluring as she may be, is never seen in the harsh material way that Myrtle is, but is seen instead in musical terms: she has a "low, thrilling voice ... that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again" (p. 9). Her "sad and lovely" face, "bright eyes and ... bright passionate mouth" are attractive to men, but it is the "singing compulsion" of her voice that holds the "promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour" (pp. 9-10). The almost metaphysical charm Daisy holds for men is further suggested by her maiden surname—Fay—a word meaning "fairy" and "elf," and harboring literary connotations from celtic mythology and folklore associated with the divine but dangerous Morgan Le Fay, who like Daisy, was associated with water and who was both enchantress and witch, as well as simply Lady Fortune. And finally, of course, Daisy's symbolic nature is suggested in the way that Jay Gatsby sees her: while Nick hears music in her voice, Gatsby hears money, though it is not the money itself which attracts Jay, but what it represents, "High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl" (p. 120). Hence, where Tom was attracted to Myrtle physically, Gatsby was attracted to Daisy for purely idealistic, romantic and even metaphysical reasons.

But Nick sees Daisy rather differently, for he is aware of the ways in which she fails to equal Gatsby's vision of her. And because Nick realizes her basic weakness, insincerity and shallowness, his ultimate valuation of her, as well as of her husband, is little higher than that of the lower class Myrtle Wilson: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made ..." (pp. 180-81). So the last time Nick sees Gatsby, he tells him he is "worth the whole damn bunch put together" (p. 154). Consequently, the contrapuntal relationship between Daisy and Myrtle, as between Buchanan and Gatsby, teaches Nick that one must be judged individually rather than collectively, as social judgments are usually made. And it shows him, in addition, that the vitality of the visionary such as Gatsby is much more durable than physical vitality such as Myrtle's, for Gatsby meant something while Myrtle only existed, just as Daisy, as a symbol, achieved something like universal significance despite her weakness as a human being.

This disparity between the social judgment and the universal meaning is illustrated in the final contrapointed character relationship. Hardly to be considered major characters, these last figures nevertheless play a major symbolic role, for they emphasize the fallibility of the conventional attitudes of society by contrasting them to more absolute standards. These characters,
who are not really “characters” in the usual sense, are Dr. T. J. Eckleburg and the unnamed “owl-eyed man.” The links between the two are purely emblematic: the doctor is represented only by the “enormous yellow-spectacles” which “some wild wag of an oculist set . . . there to fatten his practice . . . , and then sank down himself into eternal blindness . . . ” (p. 23), and the other is known to us only as “a stout, middle-aged man, with enormous owl-eyed spectacles” (p. 45). The man seems to represent the judgments of the world, for in his only two appearances he renders the superficial verdict: on his first appearance he expresses amazement at the fact the books in Gatsby’s library are real, while on his last appearance he gives the realist’s and the materialist’s epitaph for the dead Gatsby: “The poor son-of-a-bitch,” he said (p. 176). Dr. Eckleburg never actually speaks, but he does have his prophet, as it were, in a deranged George Wilson, who looks upon the giant eyes as God Himself as he tells his friend Michaelis what he had told his wife: “You may fool me, but you can’t fool God” (p. 160). Although the grotesque eyes may symbolize only a god of the wasteland, in terms of the novel’s themes, none of the characters—Myrtle included—is able to escape the absolute judgments expressed by the novelist—in this case, Nick Carraway. Consequently, since the central themes involve perception, insight, the good doctor’s function seems hardly distinguishable from Nick’s own: both reduce the major protagonist’s to their essential valuations; as Wilson suggests, no one escapes those eyes, but those eyes are really Nick’s. And his perception of the real meaning of Gatsby’s life—and death—which differs considerably from “Owl-eyes’” view, is the basic reason for his moral and ethical growth: “. . . Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and shortwinded elations of men” (p. 2). In the beginning, Gatsby had “represented everything for which Nick had an unaffected scorn” (p. 2), but again conventional social and moral standards have been inadequate to judge the essential man, and Nick’s awareness of this inadequacy has contributed to his own development.

This thematic movement in the novel is suggested in the counterpointing of physical settings, in addition to character counterpoint. Just as contrapuntal characterizations lead to Nick’s development, the contrapuntal settings also serve as gauges of moral and ethical change. The most general settings are the Middle West and the East. Restless after the Great War, Nick decides that, “instead of being the warm center of the world, the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe . . .” (p. 3). So, reversing Greeley’s maxim, Nick goes East to seek his fortune in the bond business, convinced that it was far superior to the “sprawling” towns of the West. In the East, the macrocosmic contrasts are repeated in the microcosms of West Egg and East Egg. West Egg, of course, was where both Nick and Gatsby lived, and it is the epitome of the less fashionable areas which aspire to the status and the grandeur of the East Eggs of the world. But these differences are made even more concrete in the contrasts between the vulgar West Egg mansion of Gatsby, “a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanning new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden” (p. 5), and the Buchanans’ fashionable “white palace” in East Egg, “a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay,” with a lawn which
“started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens . . .” (p. 6). And this pattern is carried further in the contrasts between Gatsby’s epic parties and the Buchanans’ neat, rigidly controlled dinners, which are also counterpointed by the vulgar entertainments at Myrtle Wilson’s apartment.

But if the juxtapositions show the aesthetic and social superiority of East Egg, they prove nothing in moral and ethical terms, for Nick learns that morality and ethics have nothing to do with the quality of one’s parties, but only with the purity of one’s vision. So as Nick recognizes the geographical wasteland of the valley of ashes, he perceives the spiritual wasteland of the East as well. Consequently, he reverses his original valuations, and, at the novel’s conclusion, he can say that “after Gatsby’s death the East was haunted for me . . .” (p. 178). And in contrast to the valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens” (p. 23) —he comes to accept bis Middle West: “not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow” (p. 177). Where Nick is aware of the superficial superiority of the East, it has for him now a “quality of distortion.” But of his Middle West he says: “I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name” (p. 177). Whatever else he may have gained, Nick at least has gained a sense of family unity and communal stability from his sojourn in the East.

**While** counterpoint in characterization, setting, scene, and symbol is essential to the novel’s thematic structure, the narrative structure is determined by what we may call, after Northrop Frye, “modal counterpoint.” This is a technique which uses the structural contrasts between antithetical narrative modes, such as “romance” and “irony” or “tragedy” and “comedy.” Frye suggests that it is modal counterpoint which makes much of our greatest literature great; certainly such seems to be the case among our greatest American novels: recall, for example, the contrapuntal tragedy and comedy of *Moby Dick*, *The Marble Faun* or *Billy Budd* and the elements of romance and irony in *Huck Finn*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, or the romantic comedy of *Light in August* contrasted to its tragic irony. In this literature, the basic narrative metaphor is the “Adamic journey,” which, in one form, involves “the ritualistic trials of the young innocent, liberated from family and social history or bereft of them; advancing hopefully into a complex world he knows not of, radically affecting that world and radically affected by it; defeated, perhaps even destroyed . . . but leaving his mark upon the world, and a sign in which conquest may later become possible for the survivors,” but which, in another form, involves a character who shares the guilt of society, but whose awareness of his guilt leads to a symbolic moral rebirth and a “wise” innocence founded upon experience and an understanding of its own irrevocable sense of guilt. Consequently, in either form, the “Adamic journey” is an initiation story based upon the Biblical pattern of life in Eden, the fall from innocence,

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ultimate redemption, and a return to a state comparable to Edenic innocence. But in the first pattern the tag for the central scapegoat hero is usually "Christ-figure," while in the second the critical shorthand usually identifies the hero as Adam or simply man or mankind, both patterns suggesting, at any rate, universal or archetypal significances.

One reason for the tremendous evolutionary power of The Great Gatsby is its counterpointing both sides of this narrative pattern in order to comment ambivalently about the rather Edenic elements of the American Dream. In the novel, the romantic and tragic aspects of the myth are presented through Jay Gatsby, while the ironic and comic aspects are seen through the narrator, Nick Carraway. Gatsby fits perfectly the pattern R. W. B. Lewis describes: he is both innocent and liberated from his family and history; in addition, he advances into the great world he does not really understand, and is affected by the world, while at the same time affecting it; and he is eventually destroyed, though he leaves a legacy foreshadowing victory for his surviving followers—in this case, the surviving follower, Nick Carraway. In addition to similarities to Lewis's pattern, Gatsby bears important resemblances to the traditional Christ. These resemblances, displaced into metaphorical language, are underlined in Fitzgerald's descriptions of his character: "The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about his Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" (p. 99). But as the son of God, Gatsby is destined to appear a failure, for his visions can be embodied only in the mutable materials of the world he is forced to dwell in. Hence, "He knew that when he kissed this girl [Daisy], and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God... [But]... he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete" (p. 112). And when the spirit is attached to the flesh in this ironic incarnation, Gatsby's fate is just as effectively sealed as the Christ's. But as the archetypal scapegoat, Gatsby has significance far greater than he can be aware of, because his tragedy provides the means for Nick's moral regeneration.

The pattern of Nick's narrative is closer to the Adamic fall and redemption than to the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. But since Gatsby's story provides the core of the novel, there are the significant nodes of meaning in Nick's story to contend with, but not the many details. Still it is clear enough that Nick fits the second pattern we described above: through his own choice, he is isolated from his community structure, and enters into the forbidding wasteland of the valley of ashes and Eastern society, begins to be aware of his personal and social guilt (as we have suggested in preceding discussions), and finally rejects his "fallen" companions and their world because of his recognition of the values of Jay Gatsby and his visionary ideals. And the ultimate result is surely a "wise" innocence better suited to the world's realities and a grateful return to the old, almost prelapsarian way of life suggested by his changed attitude toward his Middle West. Along with the revaluation of his companions and their social and moral structure, Nick reassesses the value of the American Dream itself. And in the marvelously suggestive prose of the novel's conclusion, he indicates his dissatisfaction with chronological primitivism, which longs for a golden age, a "green world," of the past; but this criticism is incompatible with his judgment of Gatsby's dream, for he has already made it the basis for
Gatsby’s superiority over “the whole damn bunch” of the others. What we are left with, therefore, is a belief in the quest and the quester, but a rejection of his goals. Thus Nick’s recognition is that though the goals of the quest may be worthless or unattainable, still the journey must be undertaken, for the vision gives a character to one’s life that the undirected carelessness of the Buchanans of the world can never attain.

As a result of the very effective use of contrapuntal patterns, even Fitzgerald’s theme is a paradoxical combination of two counterpointed attitudes toward the American Dream. On the one hand, as Marius Bewley says, “We recognize that the great achievement of this novel is that it manages, while poetically evoking a sense of the goodness of that early dream, to offer the most damaging criticism of it in American literature.” And yet, in the novel, Fitzgerald proves once again his enchantment with the kind of romantic ideal represented by the Edenic myth and embodied in “the American Adam.” The noted critic, Lionel Trilling, writes, “Fitzgerald was perhaps the last notable writer to affirm the Romantic fantasy, descended from the Renaissance, of personal ambition and heroism, of life committed to, or thrown away for, some ideal of self.” Consequently, the final major problem in the novel seems to involve the resolution of these antithetical themes. But there is no real need to achieve a synthesis, for one theme is just as valid as the other. All we must remember is that there is nothing wrong with the dream or with the quest; the failures of both, where they fail, are due to the dream’s being embodied in the wrong forms, causing the quest to move in the wrong directions. The vision itself is enduring, enlightening and, perhaps, unattainable, a truth which is hinted symbolically by the fact that there is no counterpoint for the green light at the end of Daisy’s boat dock. This exception to the rule of counterpoint in the novel suggests that there can be no alternative to the pursuit of the light, which, through Daisy, is associated with the Grail itself, for without the vision and the quest one must remain forever dead to the promises of life. The legacy Gatsby leaves to Carraway is exactly that—a promise of life that can be redeemed in his own world and in his own terms. And *The Great Gatsby* becomes as much a “poem” in praise of the quest, the quester, and the possibilities of the American Dream as, say, *The Bridge of Hart Crane*.

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**Televictim**

Pity the scribe who used to write  
In every moment spare  
But now is T.V.’s slave each night  
And only plots to stare.

—Dick Hayman

Salinas, California